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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 HARARE 001711

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#) [ZANU](#) [PF](#)

SUBJECT: TALKS ON TALKS: MOMENTUM TOWARD ZIMBABWE POLITICAL
DIALOGUE REMAINS ELUSIVE

REF: (A) HARARE 1600 (B) HARARE 1599 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER WIN DAYTON; REASON - SECTION 1.5 (B) (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: A series of meetings between political players here and HIRC Africa Subcommittee staffer Malik Chaka illuminated the tentative state of play of various efforts to get ZANU-PF/MDC talks resumed. ZANU-PF Chairman John Nkomo highlighted improvements in the political atmosphere and emphasized the ruling party's willingness to undertake dialogue with the opposition -- after a few obstacles were removed. For its part, the MDC leadership conceded that ZANU-PF had made some positive moves but indicated that Mugabe's party still appeared unwilling to consider meaningful change. These and other meetings, including one with members of the bishops troika, indicate that the bishops' initiative most likely is dead as a potential formal mediating mechanism, although the parties continue to talk quietly in other channels about getting dialogue going -- directly and through the South African Government. Although ZANU-PF appears to be dragging its feet for now, it may yet agree to commencement of some form of talks before the end of the year -- presumably strategically timed for maximum domestic and international public relations benefit. The cordial tone and relatively open access extended by the government to Chaka may signal government interest in a less hostile relationship with the USG. END SUMMARY.

Nkomo Underscores ZANU-PF Interest in Talks

2. (C) ZANU-PF Chairman John Nkomo warmly welcomed Chaka and Ambassador Sullivan to his office for an hour-plus meeting August 20. Nkomo asserted that the worst was over in Zimbabwe and that all parties recognized the need to collaborate in addressing the country's difficulties. ZANU-PF was not "anti-opposition," he explained; aside from a few issues such as land redistribution, the parties were separated only by a difference in focus that was magnified by rhetoric. This generated unnecessary tension that already had absorbed too much time and resources.

3. (C) Nkomo emphasized that ZANU-PF and MDC representatives were talking on an individual basis. Negotiating teams already were in place, although "structure was still preliminary" and commencing formal talks now would be premature. Litigation initiated by each side hampered efforts at constructive engagement. Nkomo maintained that resolution of the legitimacy issue needed to precede talks -- "on what basis can we relate if we are not recognized?" Nonetheless, both parties were contributing to improving atmospherics that would eventually support commencement of dialogue. The opposition's appearance in parliament was an example of such measures and evidenced that the parties were talking. "To the outside, we appear enemies; when we meet, we are not enemies." Nkomo dismissed the sometimes shrill voices on both sides that opposed dialogue as a misinformed, irrelevant minority. Mugabe himself wanted to see the impasse resolved. Contradicting his own earlier assertion that talks were premature, he said talks could restart any time.

4. (C) Turning to the bishops' initiative to jump start political dialogue, Nkomo essentially confirmed the bishops' chronology of exchanges between the party and the bishops (ref B). As to their substantive role, however, ZANU-PF saw the bishops only as facilitators of dialogue; they were welcomed "between the parties" but not as formal mediators. The churchmen had exceeded their brief in soliciting agendas, according to Nkomo. For now, ZANU-PF would continue to talk to them and hoped they would foster a positive atmosphere for talks.

5. (C) Nkomo acknowledged a constructive role for South Africa in moving toward dialogue. He had met with Thabo Mbeki three weeks before and knew the SAG had received delegations from both sides. For his part, he had assured Mbeki that things were moving, ZANU-PF had accepted a church role, and intra-parliamentary relations were productive.

16. (C) Nkomo stressed that the political environment was at the root of Zimbabwe's economic crisis. Policies lacked cohesion and both domestic and international players had lost confidence in Zimbabwe. Regulatory systems were collapsing and businesses were paralyzed by uncertainty. Nkomo opined that rains could yet save Zimbabwe, but that the starting point for sustainable recovery in any event was to stem the collapse in confidence -- this had to start with progress on the political front. Zimbabwe was part of the globalized community and needed international assistance. The GOZ was working discreetly at the ministerial level to inquire at the IMF and World Bank about possible prescriptions for re-engagement and he was confident they would return once political progress was firmly established. Nkomo acknowledged the importance of NGO work in Zimbabwe and elaborated on recently announced adjustments to humanitarian relief distribution channels (reported septel). In the meantime, resource constraints stemming from economic crisis complicated politics. After alluding to earlier U.S. and U.K. commitments to fund land redistribution, Nkomo acknowledged the need to review progress and mistakes in land reform. In this regard, the Utete Commission report under review would help guide future action.

MDC Leaders Warily Pushing for Talks

17. (C) Ambassador Sullivan's lunch for Chaka on August 21 was attended by MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai, Vice President Gibson Sibanda, Secretary General Welshman Ncube, Deputy Secretary General Gift Chimankire, and Director for Presidential Affairs Gandhi Mudzingwa. The MDC leadership reported that they were seeing more openness and communication from ZANU-PF. Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa had been the one to propose and work for MDC attendance at Mugabe's parliamentary address. Inter-party relations had improved in parliament, where MPs were being given some latitude in reporting views out of committee, for example. On the campaign front, police had facilitated Tsvangirai's stumping efforts in Victoria Falls, and "Green

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Bombers" intimidating MDC activists in Gwanda had been arrested. Nonetheless, ZANU-PF intimidation and/or harassment continued at varying levels throughout the country, especially in rural areas, and risked reaching a self-sustaining level.

18. (C) As to the substance of inter-party contacts, Ncube cast as "unreal" ZANU-PF's four principal demands -- irreversibility of land reform, non-interference by international community, recognition of the role of the liberation struggle, and "sovereignty." ZANU-PF interlocutors characterized issues raised by MDC (e.g., democratic processes, fuel crisis, inflation) as "symptoms" and not necessarily appropriate for talks at this stage. Ncube remarked on the consistency of ZANU-PF interlocutors on substance, notwithstanding the ad hoc appearance of different channels of communication. Tsvangirai asserted that ZANU-PF's apparent hesitancy was most likely calculated and not reflective of significant division in its ranks. Nonetheless, as long as succession was an open question, mutual suspicions and divergent self-interest of ZANU-PF principals would be a potential impediment to meaningful dialogue. It was in the interest of each aspiring successor to be seen as the one able to deliver Mugabe the longest stay in power. No formal negotiating teams had been set by either side, aside from the potential to carry over the composition of last year's suspended talks.

19. (C) Elaborating on ZANU-PF succession, Tsvangirai observed that the possibly imminent demise of Vice President Mudzenza (reportedly on life support) could prompt a "restructuring exercise" with implications for succession. Mugabe's appointment could indicate his chosen successor, but such a forced choice would only be accepted by the party until the next election. Tsvangirai identified potential successors as Parliamentary Speaker Emmerson Mnangagwa, Solomon Majuro, former Finance Minister Simba Makoni, with Defense Minister Sidney Sikeremayi as a possible compromise candidate; he dismissed John Nkomo as lacking any important constituency. In any event, he predicted ZANU-PF would rally around a compromise candidate if one were named.

10. (C) Speculating about South Africa's intentions, Tsvangirai asserted that Mbeki "knew that time was flying."

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Most SAG efforts appeared geared to getting progress underway before the Commonwealth heads of government December meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja, presumably with a view to having Zimbabwe's suspension lifted. Support continued to be strong within the Commonwealth for Zimbabwe's continued suspension but the South Africans already were preparing to have the suspension on the CHOGM agenda. The South Africans were becoming

frustrated as "promises were not being kept," however, and perhaps it was time for Mbeki to assert himself personally. Tsvangirai said he thought that SAG direct pressure on Mugabe

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could be decisive in getting ZANU-PF to the table, but the MDC leadership present was uncertain how far the SAG intended to push in that regard. Like others, the South Africans were constrained by ZANU-PF succession issues -- "the transition within a transition." Ncube concluded that the suspension would continue if the CHOGM consultations were private, but that public positions could prove problematic. He counted Ghana, Botswana, and Kenya in the camp for continued suspension, and suggested that Nigeria's decision on whether to invite Mugabe to the meeting could indicate which way the wind was blowing.

11. (C) The leadership noted a tension between its sense that the public was not ripe for renewed mass action and rank-and-file pressure to forego negotiation for a more provocative posture. The cash crisis could spark unrest in rural areas, where most people lacked any other medium of commerce. In any event, concerted mass action would likely alienate South Africa at a particularly inopportune time. The leadership said they quietly hoped that the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU) would decide in upcoming meetings to take some form of overt action that would press the government (and the South Africans) without the MDC having to serve as lightning rod.

12. (C) The leadership detailed its strategy for the election petition, scheduled to go to court on November 3. The presiding judge had yet to be named but would certainly be controlled by the government; thus, a final decision against the petitioners was certain. The best the leadership could hope for was that its compelling case would be openly aired and that the court would find for petitioners on some potentially high-profile pre-decisional procedural motions. Media management would be important, and the party would undertake to get coverage through South Africa even if the international press were excluded from local proceedings. Facing the threat of a contempt order for allegedly trying to influence the court's decision, MDC would be very sensitive and cautious in its media strategy. Tsvangirai predicted that ZANU-PF, anticipating potentially embarrassing developments at the hearing, could be expected to generate positive publicity in late October, perhaps with a push to get some kind of talks going. The case could drag on for months as part of ZANU-PF's strategy of bleeding the MDC through legal fees (the MDC's biggest budget line item).

Makoni Optimistic About ZANU-PF Reform

13. (C) In a meeting on August 21 with Chaka and Ambassador Sullivan, former Finance Minister Simba Makoni sounded upbeat on the prospect for political progress in Zimbabwe. Echoing Nkomo, he asserted that the root cause of Zimbabwe's crisis was "the way we have done our politics." Economic problems were symptoms of "political malaise." According to Makoni, ZANU-PF membership was nearly united in support for change but lacked a clear scenario through which to effect such change. He concluded that a Gorbachev-style opening directed from the top seemed unlikely. More likely, ZANU-PF would choose Mugabe's successor, who would effect a more constructive economic and political agenda. Makoni said that inter-party dialogue may yet succeed, but that ZANU-PF succession was most likely to be the key to national reconciliation and recovery. Makoni devoted most of the remainder of his comments to the economy (reported septel).

Coltart Sees Unchanging ZANU-PF

14. (C) MDC MP and Shadow Secretary for Legal Affairs David Coltart met with Chaka and emboffs on August 24 and sketched his views of ZANU-PF in the context of recent developments. According to Coltart, ZANU-PF's intolerance of opposition was deeply ingrained and went far beyond Mugabe. He predicted that ZANU-PF would swallow the MDC in a government of national unity even if Mugabe were gone. Notwithstanding differences between ZAPU and MDC, ZANU-PF's absorption of ZAPU in 1987 remained an applicable lesson today. ZANU-PF successor aspirants would likely stick together after Mugabe in spite of their occasionally divergent personal interests and views, and Vice-President Muzenda's passing would not trigger significant divisions within the party. In any event, there were reasonable interlocutors, such as John Nkomo, within the ruling party.

15. MDC's prospects were better than ZAPU's, Coltart concluded, with the absence of cold war and apartheid and because the economy was no longer sustainable. Furthermore, ZANU-PF, in spite of relatively strong party discipline, was largely reactive and capable of great "stupidity." The party's resort to the treason trial and Tsvangirai's

detention, its handling of Cricket World Cup publicity, and attempts to control humanitarian food relief were just some recent examples. The key to countering ZANU-PF's intolerant nature lay in reinforcement and construction of institutional balances within government and civil society.

16. (C) As to recent evidence of a thawing in inter-party relations, Coltart conceded that there had been superficial improvements, including more free campaigning. Violence levels seemed down, although areas such as his home district Bulawayo had seen relatively violence-free elections before. Even without violence, however, ZANU-PF continued to resort to underhanded tactics that compromised the election's freeness and fairness. In Bulawayo, for example, the election registrar only shared election rolls with the MDC very late and after weeks of requests; one of the five rolls remained outstanding just one week before the election. Distribution of food and other benefits also was as politicized as ever, with ZANU-PF cards necessary for receipt of government-supplied maize on a widespread basis throughout the country.

17. (U) Coltart reported that he intended to be in an inter-party Zimbabwean delegation traveling to the United States to participate in a Parliamentarians for Global Action event, and planned to be in Washington September 15-16.

Churchmen on Fostering Atmospherics

18. (C) In a meeting with Chaka and poloffs on August 23 at the residence of President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe Bishop Trevor Manhanga, Manhanga and President of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference Bishop Patrick Mutume detailed obstacles to resumption of political dialogue. They said that ZANU-PF continued to engage with them, notwithstanding the Justice Minister's critical outburst and Nkomo's vacillation about their role. In private, ZANU-PF interlocutors asserted that legitimacy, the election contest, and the MDC's foreign connections constituted obstacles to commencement of talks. The bishops dismissed ZANU-PF's public assertions that there had been no agreement about submission of agendas but recognized that ZANU-PF was not now prepared to move forward on their initiative. According to the bishops, the party was handicapped by the dissonance of senior officials' individual interests and an inability to resolve its succession issue. The economic crisis was distracting, especially with ruling party figures striving to exploit the evolving environment at opposition expense. Publicity and a partisan press further hindered efforts to bridge differences. Sensationalist coverage of Mugabe's Heroes Day speech (ref A), for example, ignored his markedly moderate tone and scaled back rhetoric, and missed an opportunity to project positive atmospherics conducive to dialogue.

19. (C) The bishops said they were undeterred by ZANU-PF's cold shoulder and were still operating under Mugabe's invitation to see what they could do (ref B). They asserted that atmospherics were improving between the parties, who seemed to be posturing toward some re-engagement albeit with different degrees of enthusiasm. Particularly encouraging were recent developments in their Mutare district. The two received a very warm welcome at a local ZANU-PF public event conducted the night before with all senior local officials and Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa in attendance. (As an aside, the bishops lamented that Chinamasa was the only government minister from Manicaland, leaving Manicaland essentially unrepresented in the government.) All speakers publicly recognized the bishops' attendance with gratitude and Manhanga was invited to offer a closing benediction. Chinamasa had appeared somewhat taken aback by their presence and offered a moderate statement with only one back-handed reference to the churches' association with foreign interests. Separately, the bishops had gotten all three candidates for mayor in the August 30-31 election to agree publicly to abide by a code of conduct, with the churches' acting as intermediaries to help resolve complaints. The bishops' were taking the initiative at the local level with a view possibly to introducing it more widely in future elections if it proved successful.

20. (C) On the international front, the bishops advised that President Mbeki was ready to meet with them but they wanted first to have progress to show for their efforts. Nevertheless, if nothing developed soon, they would visit him for assistance. With a view to further inducing Mugabe to move forward, they again (ref B) inquired what developments would permit the international community to resume a more normalized relationship with Zimbabwe.

Comment

21. (C) The Chaka staffdel offered a well-timed opportunity to engage a host of key participants privately on the status

of Zimbabwe's talks on talks. The broad and high-level access afforded Chaka -- surprising and unmatched in the past year -- may bear testament to interest among the ZANU-PF leadership in projecting the impression that it is serious about political dialogue and Zimbabwe's international relations. At the same time, the party has yet to indicate definitively that it will commence talks or, much less, on what terms. Certainly, the breadth and generality of the issues framed by the parties (e.g., "legitimacy," "free and fair elections"), while potentially polarizing, leave room for finesse and resolution should both parties muster the will to talk. Nkomo's concession that political progress must precede economic recovery echoes a long-standing conclusion of many regime critics, but it is not at all clear that the belief is shared by his boss. Indeed, Mugabe's personal views on succession remain a decisive but still uncertain factor in the talks equation.

122. (C) Whether ZANU-PF's temporizing is a conscious strategy or reflective of internal indecision, the ruling party appears so far to sit in the catbird's seat on the timing of talks. For its part, the MDC can be expected to continue pressing for talks but might later seek to hold out for concessions if it perceives ZANU-PF wants the talks badly enough. Weakening the MDC's hand is the reality that Mugabe and his inner circle appear to be impervious to the suffering associated with country's political impasse and economic collapse. The government's interest in its Commonwealth status and future re-engagement by international financial institutions is real but not ultimately decisive. It remains unclear how assertive South Africa is being with the regime, or how the regime would respond to various degrees of South African pressure.

123. (C) Even if ZANU-PF's professed interest in meaningful talks is entirely disingenuous, its nascent efforts at a more cooperative posture are a potentially positive incremental development. It is becoming more acceptable for long-cowed ZANU-PF elements to be seen with and to talk with regime critics. This opening, which may encompass diplomatic and civil society circles as well, may subject the ZANU-PF to greater influence from the outside and stimulate more genuine debate within the party, although this is not a given. Cross-party confidence-building at a personal level may begin to take on a life of its own regardless of party leadership intentions -- an objective underlying in part the bishops' indefatigable efforts.

124. (C) This weekend's scheduled parliamentary by-elections and mayoral and urban council elections (septel) will offer another potential benchmark by which to measure inter-party relations and atmospherics for talks. The government's response to international outcry over announced adjustments to humanitarian food distribution procedures (septel) will further indicate its sensitivity to international opinion and the extent to which it is willing to exploit the politics of suffering.

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